

[Privacy Policy](#)

- Home
- What's New
- Sitemap

Eras

- Early Christianity
- Nicea/Trinity
- Early Middle Ages
- Late Middle Ages
- Protestant Reformation
- Modern Christianity

Ancient Writings

- Early Christian Writings
- Quotes

Topics

- Christian Teachings
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Martyrs
- Roman Catholicism

- Paul Pavao Books
- About Me
- Contact Me

Recent Articles

[Dispensations of the Bible: Quotes from the Early](#)

Christian-History.org does not receive any personally identifiable information from the search bar below.

Search DuckDuckGo

Is the Roman Catholic Church the One True Church

Typically, the Roman Catholic Church has claimed early church history for its own. It quotes the early church fathers as its authorities that they are the one true church, and then the Protestants argue against the authority of the fathers.

My book, *Rome's Audacious Claim*, goes through the church fathers to refute the claim of Roman Catholic apologists that there was a pope in the first century. It explains how fourth-century events explain the rise of the papacy, the (later) development of Roman Catholicism, and then opens the door on the sordid results of Roman religious rule. Available where books are sold. [See Amazon reviews.](#)

It's high time we correct the RCC's revisionist history. Their historians know very well how dishonest they have to be with history, carefully selecting their quotes, and often pulling them out of context. The church fathers, especially prior to [the Council of Nicea](#), do not back up the Roman Catholic version of history.

This page assumes that you know that the Roman Catholic Church bases their authority on the teaching that Peter received universal authority from Jesus, then passed it on to the bishop of Rome.

Whoever is the bishop of Rome is thus automatically the pope, bishop over all other bishops.

There is a *lot* of information on this page. I believe you'll find it captivating; however, if you want a lot of this same information in video form, I have [a video teaching on](#)

Early Church History Newsletter

You will be notified of new articles, and I send teachings based on the pre-Nicene fathers intermittently.

[Back issues available!](#)

When you sign up for my newsletter, your email address will not be shared. We will only use it to send you the newsletter.

Email

Name

Subscribe

Cookies help us deliver our services. By using our services, you agree to our use of cookies. [Learn more.](#)

Got it!

Church Fathers

Mar 04, 26 09:03 AM

There are many disputes about the dispensations of the Bible. What did the early church fathers say they were?

[Read More](#)

The Role of Early Church Unity in Strengthening Modern-Day Faith

Dec 24, 25 01:51 PM

The Role of Early Church Unity in Strengthening Modern-Day Faith covers unity in early Christian history and modern application

[Read More](#)

FAQ: How to Start Reading the Early Church Fathers

Jun 02, 25 04:01 PM



People often ask me how to start reading the early church fathers. Here's the answer.

[Read More](#)

[apostolic succession](#) and another on [the history of the papacy](#), which thus addresses whether the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church.

Why the Timing of Nicea Matters

I am going to be quoting exclusively from pre-Nicene writers (those who wrote before [the Council of Nicea](#) in A.D. 325). Here's the reasons that they are the only quotes that matter.

1. The timing of Nicea matters because a long time had elapsed.

First, there are 300 years between Jesus' coming to earth and the Council of Nicea. That's a *long* time.

Once 300 years have elapsed, it's too late to quote church leaders—no matter how important or wonderful they are—as authorities that the whole church should be subject to the Roman Catholic pope. If that had been taught by the apostles, or even soon after the apostles, then why isn't it mentioned for 300 years.

And it's not!

2. The Council of Nicea matters because the church was very different afterwards.

The [church changed after the Council of Nicea](#). Whereas before Nicea the emperor of Rome had persecuted the church, after Nicea he was heavily involved in the affairs of the church, appointing and removing bishops. Before Nicea, a bishop in a church had no political power whatsoever. After Nicea, a bishop's political influence could be significant.

There were battles for the office of bishop between ambitious men even prior to Nicea, but nothing like there were afterwards.

With the position of bishop gaining authority, especially in major cities, the testimony of the fathers after Nicea cannot be relied upon to represent the views of earlier centuries on the role of central bishops like the one in Rome.

The Testimony of the Fathers *Prior to* Nicea Concerning the Roman Church as the One True Church

These facts are presented in a very short form due to the limitations of a web page. If you'd like a longer version of this history, I have a series of videos on [this page](#).

The Council of Nicea Gives the Extent of the Roman

Bishop's Power in A.D. 325

- **At the Council of Nicea, the bishop of Rome was given an authority similar to that of the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt.**

This one point ought to end all discussion! The bishop of Alexandria, Egypt was given authority over Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis, and the council said that "the like is customary for the bishop of Rome also" ([Canon 6](#)).

The Roman bishop had authority over a region similar to the Alexandrian bishop's, and this wasn't so until the 4th century. How can we discuss his having more authority than that **prior to** Nicea???

In the First and Early Second Centuries There Were Multiple Bishops in Rome

Clement of Rome, Peter, and Paul all used bishop and presbyter, the word from which the Roman Catholics get priest, interchangeably, and they speak of multiple bishops in each church.

Clement's quotes, **from a letter written just sixty years after Jesus died and rose again**, are as follows:

[The apostles] appointed the firstfruits, having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe. Nor was this any new thing, since indeed many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus saith the Scripture in a certain place, "I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith" [[Isaiah 60:17](#), from the Septuagint]. (*First Clement* 42)

Note that he doesn't mention elders (or presbyters) and that he uses bishops in the plural. That is because an elder and a bishop were the same thing to Clement:

Our sin will not be small, if we eject from the office of bishop those who have blamelessly and holily fulfilled its duties. Blessed are those presbyters who, having finished their course before now, have obtained a fruitful and perfect departure [from this world]; for they have no fear lest any one deprive them of the place now appointed them. (ibid. 44)

Here Clement does mention presbyters (elders), and it is clear that he sees them as filling the office of bishop.

This is no surprise because tradition tells us that Clement was appointed by Paul and Peter as one of those bishops, and [they both used bishop and elder interchangeably](#) ([Acts 20:17,28](#); [1](#)

[Pet. 5:1-4](#)).

We should also note that *1 Clement* does not say it is written by Clement. It is addressed from the church in Rome to the church in Corinth. Both these churches would have had their leadership set up by Paul (and in Rome's case, Peter as well), and so both churches would have had multiple elders who were all bishops at this early date.

- Ignatius of Antioch, [who greatly emphasized the office of bishop](#), did not even mention a bishop in his letter to Rome in A.D. 110.

There is much speculation as to why this is so. Personally, I think it's obvious. Rome was the only church that Ignatius wrote to whose leadership was set up by Paul. It had no monarchical (single or individual rule) bishop for him to point out.

Ignatius did write to Ephesus, but John lived in Ephesus for 30 years after Paul died. John did not set up leadership the same way that Paul and Peter did. He had a group of elders, but only one of those elders was the bishop.

Eventually, probably by the middle of the 2nd century or shortly thereafter, John's structure would hold sway everywhere.

It's been argued to me by Roman Catholic apologists that Ignatius didn't mention the bishop because he was so important, being the pope, that it was unnecessary. This hardly seems reasonable, and in addition, Polycarp avoids mentioning a bishop in the very same situation with the Philippians ...

- Polycarp Speaks Only of Elders and Deacons in His Letter to the Philippians in the Early 2nd Century

Polycarp's letter is interesting because he was a monarchical bishop, from Smyrna, but he was writing to the Philippians, a Pauline church, at a time when they would still have had Paul's leadership structure. Thus, he avoids mentioning the distinction between bishop and presbyter/elder.

He begins the letter with:

Polycarp, and the elders with him, to the church of God
sojourning at Philippi ...

Later, when he discusses the responsibilities of church leadership, he mentions only elders and deacons (chs. 4-5). There is no comment about a bishop, or even about bishops.

- The first time a monarchical bishop is mentioned in Rome is A.D. 185

Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* is the 1st time we read of a singular bishop in Rome. It is written 90 years after *1 Clement*.

Again, it's no surprise that Irenaeus assumes there was always one bishop in Rome. Irenaeus was raised in one of John's churches (Smyrna), with a monarchical bishop. By 185, even Rome and the rest of Paul and Peter's churches had adopted the eastern custom of one bishop.

Roman Catholic Apologists Misrepresent Pre-Nicene Quotes About Peter's Authority

- [Matthew 16:18-19](#) says nothing of passing anything on to Rome or any other church

Roman Catholic Apologists love to quote [Matthew 16:19](#) as proving that Peter had "the keys of the kingdom" and that the church was built on him.

Protestants, of course, object, and they argue that the church was built on Peter's confession of Christ.

For our purposes, that interpretation doesn't matter. There's really nothing in that verse that remotely suggests that Peter would be passing on authority to some other person, such as the bishop of Rome, who would then have authority over all churches. Nothing in that verse would make any unbiased reader think even that Peter had authority over other apostles.

Instead, the keys of the kingdom suggest that Peter would open up the kingdom of heaven to others, and if he's the rock upon which the church is built, then he's basically the first Christian. Both these statements have to do with being first, not with having authority over others, and neither suggest that someone other than Peter would inherit his role.

- No one says Peter's authority was passed on until A.D. 250, when Cyprian does so, and Cyprian specifically rejects the authority of the bishop of Rome.

Cyprian called the 7th Council of Carthage in A.D. 258. The council was called specifically because Stephen, bishop of Rome, had condemned the decrees of a previous north African council. There, as he introduced the council to 87 bishops of North Africa, he declared:

On this matter, each of us should bring forth what he thinks ... for neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience;

since every bishop ... has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another. ([Ante-Nicene Fathers](#) vol. V, "The Seventh Council of Carthage under Cyprian")

Whether a Roman Catholic agrees with Cyprian on that or not, he is being dishonest if he quotes Cyprian on the matter of Peter's authority and then implies or suggests that Cyprian meant that the bishop of Rome had Peter's authority. Cyprian clearly states that no bishop can rule another.

So what did Cyprian think happened to Peter's authority?

This unity we ought firmly to hold and assert, especially those of us that are bishops who preside in the Church, that we may also prove the episcopate [office of bishop] itself to be one and undivided. Let no one corrupt the truth of the faith by treacherous deception. The episcopate is one, each part of which is held by each one for the whole. (*On the Unity of the Church* 5)

I'd say that if Roman Catholic apologists are going to quote Cyprian, then they ought to quit "corrupting the truth of the faith by treacherous deception"!

Roman Catholic Apologists Misrepresent Pre-Nicene Quotes about [Apostolic Succession](#) and Rome's Authority

- Irenaeus used Rome as *one example* of a church that held to the truth, not as a church having authority over other churches.

Oh, how the Roman Catholics love this statement about the church in Rome, written by Irenaeus around A.D. 185:

It is a matter of necessity that every church should agree with this church, on account of its pre-eminent authority [Latin, *potiorem principalitatem*, or "powerful first-ness"], that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those who exist everywhere. (*Against Heresies* III:3:2)

Whoo, whoo! How much more clearly could this be said? Every church should agree with Rome.

What did Irenaeus really mean?

Well, first, let me tell you that he really meant that every church should agree with Rome. That is

"To uproot the evil of

the context of his whole argument. He is arguing that the apostles established churches, and then they appointed elders in those churches. To those elders they left a "tradition," a body of truth that the early church called [the rule of faith](#). It was the elders job to preserve that rule:

We refer [the gnostic heretics] to that tradition which originates from the apostles, which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the churches. (ibid. III:2:2)

Thus, Irenaeus was arguing that the gnostic should agree with all the churches that were founded by apostles and who preserved the truth by a succession of elders.

Is that really true, or am I imagining that? Here is what else Irenaeus said about Rome:

Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the churches, we do put to confusion all those who ... assemble in unauthorized meetings by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; also the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. (ibid. III:3:2)

So, why Rome? Because it would be tedious to reckon up the succession in all the churches, and besides, Rome was founded by the **two** greatest apostles.

simony [*the purchase of clerical positions, including the papacy*] so prevalent during the Middle Ages, the Church decreed the severest penalties against its perpetrators. Pope Julius II declared simoniacal papal elections invalid, an enactment which has since been rescinded, however, by Pope Pius X."

-- [Catholic Encyclopedia](#)

"At this period [*early 500's*] simony in the election of popes and bishops was rife among clergy and laity."

-- [Catholic Encyclopedia](#)

Isn't it interesting that he mentions two? If the authority of Rome was based on a succession from Peter, then don't you think he would have mentioned that, rather than pointing to the fact that they were founded by the **two** greatest apostles?

Finally, Irenaeus, when he is finished giving Rome's succession, adds:

Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the church in Smyrna ... when a very old man, gloriously and most nobly suffering martyrdom, departed this life, having always taught the things which he had learned from the apostles, and which the church has handed down, and which alone are true. To these things all the Asiatic churches testify, as do also those men who have succeeded Polycarp down to the present time. ... There is also a very powerful Epistle of Polycarp written to the Philippians, from which those who choose to do so ... can learn ... the preaching of the truth.

Then, again, the church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, and having John remaining among them permanently until the times of Trajan, is a true witness of the tradition of the apostles. (ibid. III:3:4)

In other words, Irenaeus could have used Smyrna or Ephesus as easily as Rome.

- Irenaeus' Concern Was the Preservation of Truth, Not the Handing Down of Authority

The argument Irenaeus was presenting had nothing whatsoever to do with one bishop's authority over another or one church's authority over another. He was arguing that the churches started by the apostles held to the truth of God, while the gnostic churches were in error.

When we refer [the gnostics] to that tradition which originates from the apostles, which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying that they themselves are wiser not merely than the presbyters, but even than the apostles. (ibid. III:3:2)

We are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches and the succession of these men to our own times. These men neither taught nor knew of anything like what [the gnostics] rave about. For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to "the perfect" apart and privately from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the churches themselves. (ibid. III:3:1)

And after Irenaeus is done giving the succession of Rome, he states:

In this order and by this succession, the ecclesiastical tradition from the apostles and the preaching of the truth have come down to us. And this is most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the church from the apostles until now, and handed down in truth. (ibid. III:3:3)

It is "most abundant proof that there is one and the same life-giving faith" from the apostles until Irenaeus' time? Or is it rather proof that the church in Rome has authority over all other churches and that 1,800 years later we should all listen to the bishop of Rome whether he's preserved apostolic truth or not?

I submit that it's the former, since that is what Irenaeus said.

- Tertullian, who uses the same argument as Irenaeus, uses multiple churches rather than just Rome, just 20 years later.

Now, what that was which they preached ... can ... properly be proved in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves, both *viva voce*, as the phrase is, and subsequently by their

epistles. If, then, these things are so, it equally apparent that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches—those molds and original sources of the faith—must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing what the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God. (*Prescription Against Heretics* 21)

For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter. In exactly the same way the other churches likewise exhibit those whom, because they have been appointed to their episcopal places by apostles, they regard as transmitters of the apostolic seed. (ibid. 32)

Come now, you who would indulge a better curiosity, if you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over to the apostolic churches, in which the very chairs of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you; you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands true authority. How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! There Peter endures a passion like his Lord's! There Paul wins his crown in a death like John's [*the Baptist*, where the apostle John was first plunged, unhurt, into boiling oil, and from there remitted to his island exile! See what she has learned, what taught, what fellowship has had with even churches in Africa! (ibid. 36)

Note that Tertullian does give Rome a special place, but it is based on the blood of so many martyrs, not on a unique succession from Peter, nor an authority over other churches.

- The Argument from Apostolic Succession Is No Longer a Good Argument

The argument presented by Irenaeus and Tertullian is that the succession of bishops (and elders) in the churches is proof that the apostolic churches had maintained apostolic teaching. Anyone who's ever played the "telephone" game knows that this might be a good argument 100 years after the last apostle died, but it's a very poor argument 1900 years later.

Pre-Nicene Writers Speak of the Authority of Churches, Not the Church

I first noticed this when I was quoting something from Tertullian's *Prescription Against Heretics*. In [chapter 21](#) the editors of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* series give this heading:

All Doctrine True Which Comes Through the Church from the Apostles

The problem is, Tertullian mentions "churches" five times in that chapter, but he never uses "church" in the singular. For example, he writes:

Now, what that was which they preached ... can ... properly be proved in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves, both *viva voce*, as the phrase is, and subsequently by their epistles.

When the apostle Paul speaks of the authority of the church in [1 Tim. 3:15](#), saying the church is the pillar and support of the truth, he is speaking of the local church, not some hierarchy in a distant city. There was no such hierarchy in Paul's day, and there wouldn't be one until the emperor got involved in the government of the churches almost three centuries later.

As proof of the paragraph above, I refer you to [Ephesians 4:11-16](#), where Paul says that the ministry of Christians in the local church to one another will keep them from being blown about by winds of doctrine and deceived by cunning and crafty men. That sort of ministry can't happen in an extra-local hierarchy.

As you can see from the above, the pre-Nicene Christians agreed with this, ascribing apostolic authority to all churches the apostles started. In fact, even churches not started by apostles have such authority if they hold to apostolic truth:

[The heretics] very doctrine, after comparison with that of the apostles, will declare, by its own diversity and disagreement, that it had for its author neither an apostle nor an apostolic man ... To this test, therefore, they will be submitted for proof by those churches, who, although they derive not their founder from apostles or apostolic men—as being of much later date, for they are in fact being founded daily—yet, since they agree in the same faith, they are accounted as not less apostolic because they are akin in doctrine. (*Prescription Against Heretics* 32)

A Personal and Scriptural Note on the Church

I add this because if you are deceived into believing that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church, then you are almost guaranteed to miss out on a Scriptural experience of the church, **which is far more**

important than most modern Christians, Roman Catholic or Protestant, realize.

Here are the things that are true of a true church, **which can only be a local church**:

- The church is saved from deception by the leading of God through its members ([Eph. 4:11-16](#); [1 Jn. 2:27](#)).
- The church grows together, and only as each part is doing its share ([1 Cor. 12:12-26](#); [Eph. 4:15-16](#)).
- The unity and good works of the church together is the light and testimony of the world ([Matt. 5:13-16](#), where all the "yous" are plural; [Jn. 17:20-23](#); [1 Thess. 1:6-10](#)).
- The church shares all things, taking care of one another, though voluntarily rather than under compulsion ([Acts 2:42-47](#); [4:32](#); [2 Cor. 8:13-15](#); [Heb. 10:33-34](#); and that this continued long past apostolic times [is testified to until at least A.D. 210](#)).
- The church is a family with responsibility to one another, even more so than our biological families ([Luke 14:26](#); [18:29-30](#); [Gal. 6:10](#); [1 Tim. 3:15](#)).

I can't resist adding this quote, from around A.D. 210, showing that when the church was young, the local churches were family. Note that this is not written in command form but as a simple declaration of how Christians lived.

But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. "See," they say, "how they love one another," for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. "How they are ready even to die for one another," for they themselves will sooner put to death. And they are angry with us, too, because we call each other brothers; for no other reason, I think, than because among themselves names of consanguinity [blood relations] are assumed in mere pretence of affection.

But we are your brothers as well, by the law of our common mother nature, though you are hardly men, because brothers so unkind. At the same time, how much more fittingly they are called and counted brothers who have been led to the knowledge of God as their common Father, who have drunk in one spirit of holiness, who from the same womb of a common ignorance have agonized into the same light of truth! But on this very account, perhaps, we are regarded as having less claim to be held true brothers, that no tragedy makes a noise in our brotherhood, or that the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. **One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another.** All things are common among us but our wives. (Tertullian, *Apology* 39)

This is the same man, who in the same chapter of the same work, said this of their *monthly* collections:

There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God. Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of purchase money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if anyone wants, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure and only if he be able. There is no compulsion; all is voluntary.

Of course, you won't find this care of one another even in Protestant churches, unless you happen upon a very rare one.

The things I say in this section are radical; I know it. However, they are Scriptural. They are not even deeply Scriptural; they can be found by simply reading.

The problem is, so few people are willing to preach the Gospel preached by Jesus and his apostles. They are afraid to tell people the cost, which Jesus said **must** be counted.

What cost did he speak of? You can read it for yourself in [Luke 14:26-33](#). Basically, he asks for everything, nothing held back. Even more importantly, he adds that ***you cannot be his disciple unless you pay that cost.***

It is impossible to form a church with people that are not disciples. Yes, there will always be counterfeit Christians; those who try to act like the real thing but are not. They should be the exception, however, and not the rule. ***To have an organization filled with people that have never even considered paying the cost Christ asked for and calling it a church is absurd.***

You will certainly never have the things the Scriptures say about the church unless disciples leave the absurd organizations (see last paragraph) most of them belong to and they come together ***by Jesus authority*** to find him in their midst.

[This is an ad written by me, Paul Pavao](#): I get a commission if you buy [Xero shoes](#), which does not increase your cost. Barefoot running/walking is the best thing for your feet--if we did not walk on cement, asphalt, and gravel. Normal shoes compress your toes and do a lot of the work your lower leg muscles should be doing. Xero shoes are minimalist and let your toes spread and your feet do the work they are supposed to do. More info at the link.

[Return to Roman Catholicism](#)

[Home](#) | [Contact Me](#)

[Facebook](#)

[X](#)

Enjoy this page? Please pay it forward. Here's how...

Citations on this Site

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses on this site are taken from the King James Version (because it's not copyrighted). Language, grammar and punctuation are updated, comparing other translations and taking care not to change any meanings.

Citations from the early church fathers are referenced, and the references can be read online at EarlyChristianWritings.com and CCEL.org. I often update the language on these, too, doing my best not to affect even possible meanings.

All unattributed images on this site are either mine or known to be in the public domain.

Copyright

Copyright © 2009-2024, Paul F. Pavao, All Rights Reserved.

You may print the pages on this site for Bible studies and similar uses.

This web site, like all published works, can be quoted without permission as long as the quote constitutes "fair use," an undefined legal term. Usually, quotes should be limited to a paragraph or two, and the law dictates that quoting more than 50% of a document is a copyright violation.

Citing this Site

MLA format for referencing *Christian History for Everyman*:

Pavao, Paul. "[Page Title](#)." *Christian History for Everyman*. Greatest Stories Ever Told. 2014. Accessed [day month year](#). <<https://www.christian-history.org/page-name.html>>

[Note that the words in blue need to be changed to match the title, date, and URL.](#)